No. 96

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

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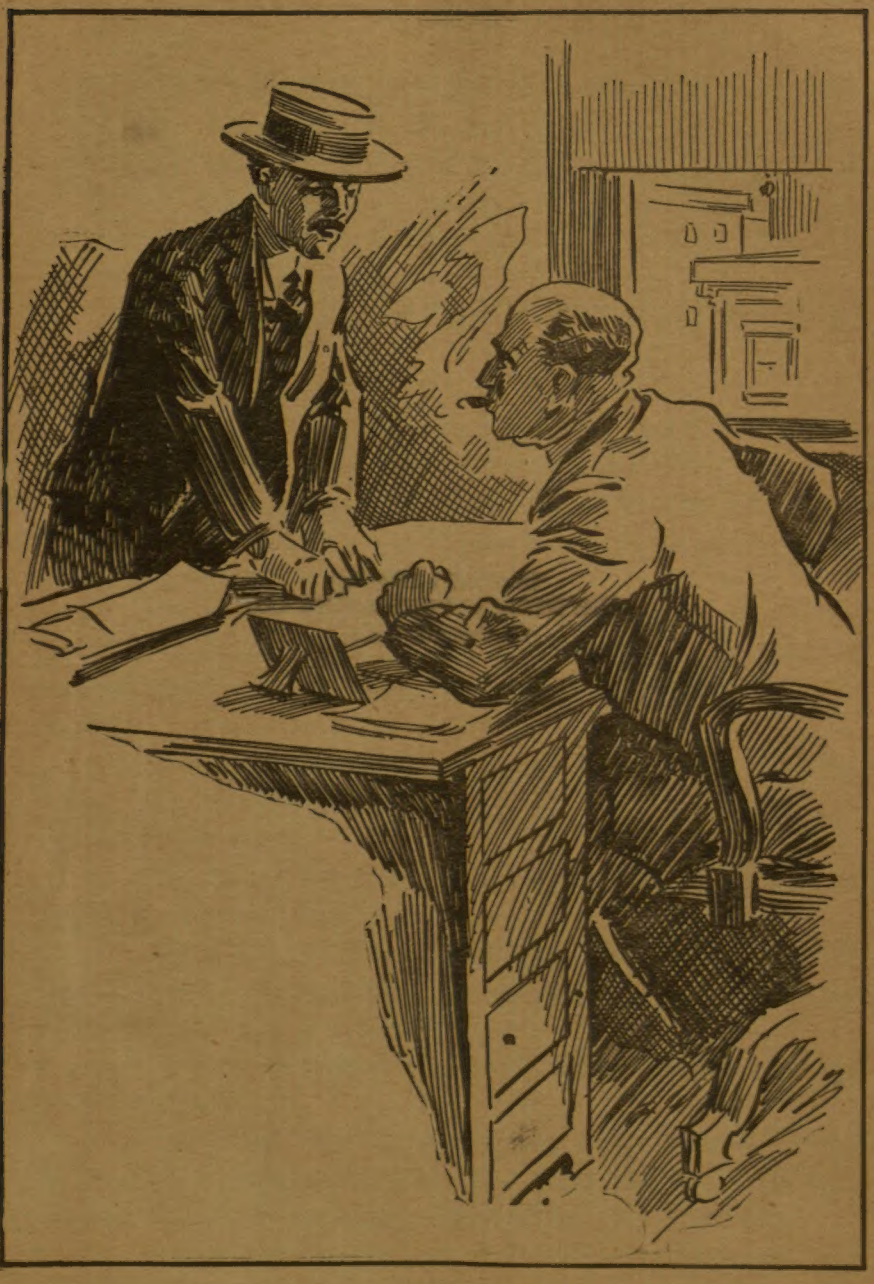

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GRAHAM ERICSEN drew himself away from his wife. She looked a crushed, forlorn creature crouching in the chair. His conquest did not deepen his respect for her. He was tired of her unfounded jealousies and told her so. She had indeed met her master.

"You are going to The Croft?" she said, still in a whisper.

"Yes."

"You won't let me go with you, but I shall think you haven't forgotten me if you refuse."

"I adhere to what I said — you can go if you please," said Ericsen. "There is no significance to be attached to the matter at all."

She was quiet and subdued when they went down to Earl's Monckton — her first visit since the terrible event that seemed more or less to have affected her health.

She sat back in the car when they neared the junction—she had the aspect of a person putting a great restraint on herself.

The recent bereavement was an excuse for not receiving or entertaining.

Alice did not stir beyond the grounds of the house, and in the house studiously avoided the rooms where old Mr. Ericsen had principally lived.

"I'm so nervous," she said, when Graham noticed this avoidance.

The place seemed trying her. She complained of increased sleeplessness; but she paid the price of continued falsities—Graham discounted half she said.

One night he went to dine with Dr. Jameson, and coming home about half-past eleven, he found that Alice had already gone to bed.

But evidently she was not asleep, for the minute

he got upstairs he heard her voice calling to him in a frightened tone.

He went into the room at once. She was lying back in an arm chair, only her dress removed, and her rich hair falling loose over her dressing gown.

She was livid, like a person sinking into a deadly faint, but what made her look ghastly was the fear that had drawn her face into the semblance of a mask.

Ericsen was utterly startled.

"What's the matter," he said, going to her. She caught his hand feebly.

"I feel—so strange," she whispered "Am I going to die?"

"No, of course not! I'll put you on the bed and get you some brandy."

She let him lift her and lay her on the bed, but before he could go laid hold of him again.

"You won't get the doctor?" she whispered.

"Don't keep me, Alice—I'll be back in a minute or two."

He could not account for her looks — they were so strange. He called the maid on his way downstairs, brought brandy and administered it, and called at once for the doctor.

When the doctor came, Alice looked a little less deathly, but as she saw the doctor her cheek again turned livid.

Dr. Jameson did not ask any questions; he evidently saw at once the cause of the girl's curious state, and administered remedies.

Then, bidding the maid put her mistress to bed, he joined Ericsen, who had gone downstairs.

"What was the matter?" said Graham at once. "I was frightened—I never saw her look so strange and white."

"Chloral," said the doctor; "an overdose."

"But she doesn't take it! Chloral!"

"I didn't see any about, but it's chloral. You had better speak to her about it. You remember — forgive the allusion—her being drugged by the—the man they can not find?"

"Yes," said Ericsen. "What then?"

"Well, that could not have been a very large quantity administered, yet look how long the effects lasted. You may recall I found her in a faint condition—a recurrence of the first faintness.

"It is, therefore, plain she is a dangerous subject for drugs. I shall expect to find her by no means recovered to-morrow."

"Was she in danger?"

"Oh, no — I think she exaggerated from fear. At the same time, she must have taken a great deal too much. She seems to me, apart from this accident, in a nervous state. Are you sure she doesn't use this dangerous drug?"

"I'm not sure one way or the other. I never saw it, and I thought it unlikely. I'll speak to her."

The doctor left.

Ericsen went upstairs. Ailce, if not asleep, was quiet, and the night passed without any further disturbance.

The next morning Ericsen, remembering the doctor's words, was surprised to find Alice plainly much better.

Could she have taken the quantity of chloral the doctor imagined.

He came up to see her after she had had her breakfast.

She received him with a smiling—"So you were very frightened last night, and sent for the doctor? I

hope he isn't coming this morning?"

"Yes, he is. I think he will be glad to see you so much better—he scarcely expected it."

"It was very stupid of me to take the stuff at all," said Alice. "But I can't sleep here—the place oppresses me, and I got some chloral."

Ericsen had taken a chair by the bedside, and as she paused, he said gravely——

"I want to speak to you about that. Have you ever taken it before?"

"What—chloral?"

"Yes — because you have often complained of sleeplessness before this."

"Sometimes," said she, half-carelessly.

"Only sometimes?"

"There! What an unbeliever you are!"

Ericsen said, in the same grave way—"I hope it isn't a habit. I hadn't any idea you took it, or I should have tried to persuade you to stop it. It's a ruinous thing to take hibitually——"

"Oh, a little gives me relief!"

"None at all, Alice. You have no business to need it. I know you gave me as a reason your nervous state, but I really think that reason is scarcely adequate now. How much did you take last night?"

"I don't know. Not so much."

"Dr. Jameson says it must have been a good deal. He does exaggerate."

"Oh! he has been putting that into your head, has he? He is full of fancies. How does he know the exact amount?"

"He ought to know by the results."

"I don't know anything about that. I didn't take very much."

Graham was not convinced. He rarely believed

Alice's unsupported word unless she had no motive for untruthfulness.

He felt sure she had a motive here—what he could not tell.

"You must give it up altogether," he said. "It's sure in the end to lead to disaster."

He did not demand a promise. He knew if Alice wanted to have it she would have it, and he was practically powerless to stop her—he could not keep a continual watch on her.

He was the more puzzled because he had not for a long time believed in her "nerves."

It was all nonsense that the knowledge of his movements about the murder case should upset her so much after all this time.

Dr. Jameson came presently, and was astonished at his patient's rapid recovery from the ill-effects of the overdose.

"She says she didn't take much," said Ericsen. "I find she uses it from time to time."

"Forbid it, then — an atrocious habit! A young woman like her doesn't need it. She is knocking her nerves to pieces. As to not taking much—absurd! She doesn't know what is 'much.'

"She has had a surprising recovery, and I can't understand the very different effect produced by a less quantity of a weaker drug. However, constitutions do change."

"Is it the drug?" said Ericsen quickly.

"I don't know—not entirely. Has she any worries —apart from her recent loss, I mean?"

"She's a person who wears herself out," said Ericsen, rather evasively. He wondered bitterly if Alice ever suffered a pang about the child.

The incident passed over. The Ericsens shortly

returned to town, where, among the letters arrived that morning, Graham found one from the detective Reeves.

He shut himself up in the library and sat down. He broke the seal mechanically, drew out the sheet of paper and began to read.

Chapter 322

THE THIRD PASSENGER

THE LETTER was a vague one. Graham could not make out from it whether Reeves had anything of importance to communicate or not. He was so utterly weary of everything that he could not be roused even by the chance of an important clue in a search hitherto disheartening.

Still, he went to Reeves' office, vexed with himself that it was so entirely from a sense of bare duty.

He was evidently expected, and shown into the detective's private room.

Reeves was sitting there, and rose immediately as his client entered.

It was the first time he had seen Ericsen since little Lilian's death, and he could not help showing his concern at the change in Graham's looks.

"You don't look at all well, sir," he said.

"I'm very well, thank you, Reeves. I've had some trouble since I saw you last."

"I heard of it, sir. I was very sorry indeed. I thought it best to see you, sir, and give you my ideas about the case." Reeves, while he spoke, arranged and rearranged some papers before him.

Ericsen sat down, and looked at the detective with a sense of his being disturbed, which was unusual.

"Do you think it's no use going on?" he asked abruptly.

"Lord, sir! you ought to have been a detective yourself — you're so quick! That was in my mind, though I don't know how it got to yours," said Reeves

with a laugh.

"I don't know myself — I've a feminine trick of jumping at things," said Ericsen. "But why do you think it best to give up?"

"Well, sir, we don't seem any nearer than before to discovery."

"What have you been doing since I saw you last?" said Ericsen, as the detective paused. "You were to continue trying to find the person who bought the chloroform. Did you do so?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you fail there I said I must give up, but unless that clue is exhausted I shall go on. Didn't you discover anything?"

Reeves paused. Perhaps the rather searching look of the grey eyes opposite disconcerted him.

"Of course," he said, "we had to consider that the chloroform might not have been bought at that particular——"

"I think we may dismiss that," Ericsen interrupted, "because chloroform, unless kept in a proper receptacle, quickly evaporates."

"Just so, sir," said Reeves. "I merely made a suggestion. I can't say I haven't discovered anything, but its so insignificant. I daresay you think it odd, sir, my wanting to throw up a good job"—with a frank smile—"but I'm not quite unscrupulous, and when it seems sheer waste."

"Yes, but I prefer to be the judge myself," said Ericsen quietly.

He had found Reeves very fair dealing and zealous, but it was not likely he had a profound belief in the detective's absolute honesty.

There had been some discovery—it was not at all impossible that he had been "got at," and instead of the

discovery being insignificant, it was highly important.

Reeves understood that quiet tone.

"Quite so, sir," he said, rather hastily. "Well, then, I resumed the search on the lines we agreed on. It has been a difficult business—so many chemists all over London. Naturally, I went to the obscure ones first — about the East End and the north-east districts."

"Were you directing your inquiries to a man or a woman?" asked Ericsen.

"To neither, sir, exactly. The purchaser might have been either."

"That is so. Well?"

"I chanced, sir," said Reeves, again fidgeting with the papers—he was not usually fidgetty—"on a small shop in an East End Street. The minute I set eyes on the man—a foreigner—I knew he drank considerably—the sort of man and the sort of place any one would go to who wanted a suspicious article.

"I took some time over this party; got acquainted with him—chats and drinks, you know, sir," looking up and smiling, but giving at the same time a covert glance at Ericsen's face. "I found out that some chloroform had been bought at his shop in a large quantity than usual."

"When?" said Ericsen, his grave attention dashed with a touch of eagerness.

"I couldn't get the exact date, sir—he didn't put the transaction down, as it was a rather illegal one—but as far as I can make out, it was rather shortly before the murder.

"Yes? By man or a woman?" said Ericsen, leaning forward.

"A woman, sir."

Ericsen leaned back again with a deep breath.

"Not Fannie Lester?" he said.

"No, sir; not her."

There was a silence; then Ericsen said, a little impatiently——

"You see, this is not so insignificant as you said, and if it is a real clue, my idea was right when I suggested a woman months ago."

"Yes, sir," said the detective, in an odd tone. "At the same time it's only a clue, and would want a lot of following up."

"If I can reach the goal," said Ericsen, with a flush on his pale cheek, "I will manage the expense. The woman is probably an associate of the man we want. Are you assured this chloroform was bought in connection with the murder?"

"Yes, sir; pretty sure."

"Then I will go on with the case at all costs."

"At all costs!" repeated the detective, in a low tone "Mr. Ericsen—I wouldn't—I—I'd drop it, if I were you."

"What do you mean?" said Graham instinctively, getting to his feet. He held his breath as he looked at the detective.

"You don't know the cost," said Reeves. He rose too. "It wasn't anything underhand, as maybe you thought, when I tried to put you off—it's no use—you can't follow it up I'd let it alone——"

"That's impossible—I must know who you mean for sure."

He was white to the lips. He felt, indeed, as if all the blood in him was white, and lay on his breast.

"I'm going against my own hand," said Reeves, "so, as I say, I can't have any reason of my own. And if you'll take my advice, sir, you'll let this matter drop."

"Why do you give such advice? What is your reason for wanting me to abandon the quest?" said Eric-

sen. "You have said too much."

"I could do no less, sir; and I would rather do no more."

"Something you have found out," said Ericsen slowly, "about this woman—who is not Fannie Lester. Who, then, do you think she was?"

"The description I had, was, of course, not perfect. The woman was disguised, or partially so; and I may be mistaken in my idea."

"What idea?"

Reeves lifted his eyes to Ericsen's face; that showed only a certain anxiety, but the detective noticed the pallor of even the lips—a sure sign of inward strain.

"That there was no third passenger, sir," he said.

The words dropped one by one. Ericsen never moved. Reeves turned away.

Then Ericsen deliberately sat down, leaned one arm over the back of the chair, and, supporting his head with his hand, looked up at the detective.

A sort of smile curved his lips, the grey eyes had widened.

"No third passenger!" he repeated; "so you have gone back to that old suspicion. I thought that had been threshed out. I should like to know why you revive it, now."

"You put a disagreeable duty on me, sir."

"Not at all—it is your own idea; it is not necessarily mine or any one else's. It can't hurt me to know what give you the idea. Besides, I have heard it before you know."

"Mr Ericsen—for God's sake!" began the detective.

"In God's name, what do you think I am made of?" demanded Ericsen, starting up. His dark eyes were ablaze. "Am I stone—inanimate—dead, that I can go

out from this room and shut my eyes like a child in the dark? Tell me what you know, and have found out about this affair!"

He threw himself down again. Reeves did not speak.

"Who do you think this woman was?" said Ericsen more quietly, but there was a sort of scorn in his tone. "My wife? Did the description answer to her? You see, I couldn't ask these questions if it wasn't such a preposterous idea."

"I have seen Mrs. Ericsen, sir, as you know; since my discoveries I have seen her again — no you didn't know that, sir. My friend the chemist described a woman the same height and shape as hers; he did not at the time think her a common person; her accent, though disguised, was refined.

"She wore a long shabby cloak and a thick veil— she evidently wanted to hide her dress and her face. But he caught a glimpse of the dress, and saw that it was of good material, and a gold watch on her wrist. He could tell she was a fair woman.

"She asked for a quantity of chloroform, and at first he refused. She averred it was for maddening faceache. She then offered him a larger price, and he gave her the stuff. Of course he would keep silent, but as a fact he knew nothing of the murder."

Ericsen's attitude, assumed as Reeves went on, did not allow his face to be seen.

He said drily — "Yes? go on," as the detective paused.

But with all his efforts he could not help the fingers pressing close against the dark hair, instead of lying carelessly amongst it as at first.

"I'm bound to say, sir, that this information only confirmed a vague suspicion I had had some time after

I was at Earl's Monckton; after, also, I last saw you. One clue after another fell to the ground, leaving this horrible suggestion standing out clear by itself."

"A horrible suggestion, indeed!'" said Ericsen, with a half shuddering laugh. He stood up. "Well, I can't ask you to go on if this is your line! you're quite right to tell me what you believe, to warn me. I like the truth, then one knows what to be at. I'm sorry to have given you a painful task——"

"Don't speak of that, sir," said Reeves, in a moved tone. "I've tried to do my duty by you, and this seemed part of it. The obligation is on my side, for you have always been considerate and generous."

"That's nothing — thank you for your services. There's just one question I should like to ask—what did you hear at Earl's Monckton that put this first in your head?"

"Well, sir," said Reeves reluctantly. "I heard a good deal about Miss Mortimer, and the old gentleman's dislike to her—many little things that came out in gossip with the villagers and Mrs. Dale—hard to lay hold of, but I went back to them when I came to this last discovery."

"Thanks; that's a little vague, though. Now I owe you something, don't I?"

"I'll send the account, sir."

"Very well, and I'll call and pay it. I shall see you again in a day or two. Of course"—with a smile Reeves understood—"you're an old hand."

"Quite so, sir," said the detective, bowing. He attended his client to the outer door, and then turned back to his room.

"An ugly business," he thought. "I haven't a doubt myself. And, upon my soul, I believe he's shaken. He took it oddly, though he was so plucky. Depend on

it, a man don't live with a woman like that without finding her out."

Ericsen's first action was to call up a taxi, and the direction that sprang to his lips was the Fairfax's house.

He sat looking straight before him, seeing people, and houses, and strets as if they were only moving pictures and he had come amongst them from some strange land and were going he knew not where.

He knew he wanted Marjorie—he was conscious of no other want.

He said to the servant who admitted him—and he had a difficulty in making his lips move — "Ask Miss Fairfax to come to me—in her study."

He went up to Marjorie's sanctum, and sank into a chair, feeling cold and shattered, and not able to lift his head from his arm even when she came in.

He put out his hand to her blindly.

"Marjorie!" he whispered. "My God!"

And then he seemed reeling down into black abysses — he was helpless, lost, God-forsaken.

He dragged himself out of the blackness with a struggle that was like tearing body and soul, and the walls grew up around him and seemed closing in on him.

His hand clung convulsively to something soft and strong that held it. He opened his eyes.

"Marjorie!" he whispered again.

"I am here, dear—only I."

Then he knew she was standing by him, and he was half lying in her arms. He sat up, and the girl knelt by him.

She could not conjecture what had happened, but she knew it must be something so terrible that she dared not question him.

He sat pressing his hand over his eyes as if he would shut out some appalling sight; his other hand still clung to Marjorie's.

Some minutes passed; then she ventured to say—

"What is it, Graham? Can't I help you?"

"No, no—no one can! Thank God, my darling is safe!"

They seemed wild, even awful words. Marjorie did not so read them. And people in his state are not unreal. But what did they mean?

He was still scarcely himself; his voice had a very strange tone, he kept shuddering as if at some horror, and before she had rallied from the surprise and wonder of his last words, he whispered again, as if to himself—

"I can't live so! I must—I must know!"

There was something here beyond her, beyond comprehension; something more than a scene with Alice or the unhappiness of his life.

So profund—though she scarcely knew it—was Marjorie's mistrust of Alice, that the thought rose up unbidden. Was it something in her past that had come to his knowledge?

Hardly knowledge, though, else why that whisper, "I must know?"

Marjorie tried to put aside the helpless puzzle, the immediate care was Graham himself.

"If I can do nothing for you now," she said gently, "you will call on me whenever I can?"

Graham silently drew her to him and bent his head down on hers.

For a second the girl's heart beat as if it would suffocate her, then there stole over her and settled down a rapt stillness. They two were one as in their happy days.

Graham ended the strange absorbed moments. He

put her gently from him and rose.

The girl looked at him with wistful, tender eyes; he seemed to have got himself, in some sort, together, but she saw the effort and strain, and gauged by that the suffering.

"You are going?" she said. Her voice was almost faint.

"Yes. Try and forget this," he said hurriedly. "I was half mad—a shock that staggered one—but I dare-say it was folly — it must be. Good-bye, and forgive me."

Forget! Could she? Forgive—what? She put her hand in his. Graham locked it in a grip that unsaid his words, and left her.

Chapter 323

THROUGH DARKNESS

NO SOONER had Graham Ericsen crōssed the threshold of his own house than the scene in Reeves' office, the agony with Marjorie, was like a dream—a wild wretched dream. On the way home he had been fighting down the thoughts, the memories, that swarmed and hurtled in his mind.

But they seemed to go of themselves, to have had no foundation, no beginning, when he entered the familiar hall, and heard floating down from the drawing-room the clink o ftea-cups and the sound of men's and women's voices.

This was everyday life—he had been out of it, in a weird, ghastly world created by some mad imagination.

Yet there was no sense of relief at coming back to the commonplace of existence.

He went into the dinin-room and stood by the fire. Should he go upstairs to the drawing-room? There was a mirror over the mantelpiece, and he lifted his eyes to it.

How did he look—so that people would stare and wonder, and ask what had happened?

He saw a bloodless face with a drawn, chilled look with strained, glittering eyes, large and hollow. He went to the sideboard, half filled a glass of wine, and took it to the fire.

He drew up his chair as close as he could—the chill of the autumn day had got into his veins, and he shivered as he slowly drank the wine.

When he felt warmth creeping back to him he got up and looked at himself again. Yes, that would do—he would go upstairs now.

He opened the drawing-room door; his eyes ignored the groups sitting and standing about, and went straight to Alice.

She was talking to a man near her, and, the better to see him, had laid her head back against the dark cushion of her chair.

Her hair shone. The folds of her black dress draped themselves with exquisite grace about her.

One hand lay on her knee, and looked dazzlingly white against the sombre hue. Her red lips were smiling, her dark eyes uplifted.

Ericsen went forward with a sort of exultation that made him dizzy. He shook hands and smiled, and said the right things mechanically as friends came round him, glad that he had come.

"You have had some tea, Graham?" said Alice's clear voice in a momentary lull of the chatter.

He made his way to her, and she poured out some tea and gave it to him with a soft glad look in her eyes.

He moved away and talked brightly, but he did not touch the tea, and presently he put the cup down.

Then the callers began to go—they were all so pleased that the host seemed recovering from the blow of his child's death.

Ericsen surprised Alice by proposing to go to the theatre. He had not cared hitherto to go anywhere; he had, in fact, shrank from facing anything that could move him.

So they went, and he sat unstirred through one of the most human and pathetic pieces ever written.

It was not stoicism—he simply did not feel. When the play was over he was not very certain what it had all

been about.

Alice, who never could draw fine distinctions, thought he had been simply enduring and bracing himself up, and she felt angry—he ought to have been made happy by her presence.

She had a trick, when they were driving home from anywhere, of leaning against him, and claiming the support if he did not offer it.

But to-night she sat away from him, biting her lips as she looked out of the window.

Ericsen sat in the corner and closed his eyes; the long fierce strain of the day was making itself felt in a condition half dazed and wholly worn out.

He noticed nothing—he did not see her avoidance of him of feel the reason of it.

Nothing so merciful as sleep relieved him that night. Alice went upstairs as soon as she had had something to eat.

She sent the maid away when she was undressed, then listened to hear if Graham was coming up; but the house was silent.

She quickly opened the case she had hidden securely since the episode about the chloral.

"I must have it!" she thought. "I can't sleep—it's he who forces it on me—he maddens me! What's the matter with him to-night? Breaking his heart still for a dead child? As if he had nothing else!"

She mixed her dose with the great care she always now exercised; it sent her to sleep so quickly that she never heard Graham come into the dressing-room ten minutes after she was in bed.

The loneliness of the sleeping house was unendurable downstairs; he could not shut out, as he had in the day, the thoughts that came on him overwhelmingly and anew.

If he were near Alice, he said to himself, they would go as they had gone this afternoon.

And he stood by her bed-side and looked down on the calm sleep, but recalled the night at The Croft and the chloral she took "sometimes."

He turned away and threw himself on the sofa in his dressing-room, and tried to still himself into some much-needed sleep.

In five minutes he was on his feet again, possessed with the horror of his thoughts, and she so near!

Why not end it here—now—husband and wife alone, face to face with the naked truth?

A swift step brougt him to the door. He half opened it. The soft lamplight in the chamber fell on Alice's quiet, perfect face and gleaming hair.

He closed the door again.

"It's madness!" he told himself. "Oh, God! why can't I drive it out? I have no help! If I could but sleep it would all go in the day; it's the night that brings it all back to me!"

Then in utted extremity, with head sunk in his locked hands, he tried to pray, but across the agonized prayer would come those crowding memories imperiously clamoring for place. Well might heart and brain and body reel.

The impenetrable silence still reigned, beseech he ever so wildly.

He started up and went downstairs again, through the darkened house, where every soul rested save he.

By this time sheer exhaustion cleared his mind, the new day was dawning—the day he had prayed for so earnestly.

The outside would awoke—stagnation and silence and death were over. The horrible thoughts receded,

sleeping deep down perhaps, but relaxing their grip.

The respite gave Nature her chance — a brief sleep, fevered thought it was, fell on him.

When he awoke daily life had come again, the morning sun was shining—tragedies were impossible.

Alice looke dat him curiously when he came in to breakfast; again the angry feeling of last night stirred in her heart, but she was silent.

She was afraid to provoke anything like the scene before they went to The Croft. Yet again and again she stole covert glances at him.

This was surely something different; he had not looked like this — not precisely — even after Lilian's death.

She was apt to be dull intuition, except where her own interests came in—there she was quick.

She sat ostensibly reading her letters, in reality wondering what could possibly have happened. Where had he been yesterday?

Graham had not told her of the letter from the detective, Reeves or said where he was going when he went out.

"How late you were last night," she began, by way of a feeler. She had her own reasons for avoiding—at any rate, at present—any direct questions. "You don't look yourself this morning."

To which Ericsen gave the ordinary ambiguous "Don't I? I am quite well."

"You belie your looks then; but, of course, you can't expect anything else if you give yourself so little sleep."

Ericsen got up.

He felt he could bear very little this morning, and said carelessly——

"I didn't have a good night—that's all. I'll go for

a ride, and that will freshen me up."

He left the room.

Alice leaned her chin on both her hands and sat watching the closing door.

"What is it?" she said to herself. "He is alienated more and more day by day. I am no better off than when the child was here. Or is it not she, but something else. That makes him so distant—so hateful?

"I will keep him—I will! I will not lose at the last moment! Where was he yesterday? That detective—searching—searching for——"

Her face grew livid. "That was Graham's doing," clenching her hands fiercely, "his accursed thought! If it is—something—he has heard!"

She rose slowly, the livid pallor spreading from her cheeks to her lips, but the eyes burned with a dull glow, like those of an animal who fears the man it will spring at.

"What would I care," she thought, "if the man I loved was steeped in——No, it's a horrible word, I won't say it! But I would love him to the end, love him through everything, but he must love me utterly! I won't bear aversion.

"Some day I shall avenge it—even on him. How have I lost him? Haven't I loved him enough? If I can't win him back, what have I? What have I?"

Chapter 324

DEEPER DARKNESS.

EVEN TO Alice — but then it was herself in question—there was through that day a sense of something impending. Ericsen, as the moving power, had not that sense, but if he had hoped to stifle his torturing thoughts of last night, the hope failed.

They followed him into the quiet country, where the leaves were falling, and winter was preparing to take up its rule; he could not so weary himself but that they sat before him again at night, and said he should not sleep.

They formulated themselves—they led him back to the beginning and through all the life of the past two years.

And he in desperation said—"Why not thresh it out, and see what a mad fool I am? It isn't just to her to live like this."

So he yielded, and let this memory and that possess him with altogether other meanings.

What did that cry of his mean—the greeting that had seemed to him even then so terrible, but in another way—"You don't believe it? You know I could not do such a thing!"

Then she sat drooping and broken over the dying fire, and prayed him to forget her, or flashed out into reproach and tears when he suggested her going to the Fairfaxes.

Or he saw her in the car on their wedding-day, clinging to him, and breaking out into the exclamation

that it couldn't be undone.

"She isn't what you think her," his uncle had said to him more than once. "Aye, you smile—you think love sees so clearly. But love can be very, very blind."

And when this memory came in turn, Ericsen dropped his head into his hands.

If I had listened—if I had believed!" he said in his heart.

Were these things she had said and done only the beginning of her thousand daily falsities?

Was it to fire his chivalry, to force his hand, that she had asked him to give her up?

Why did she take that chloral for, and lie about it for?

Why did she strive and strive to turn him from his righteous purpose, shrink from its details, and yet insist on knowing every one of them?

"Vows come back," she had said once. Was she afraid?

That day she laid her hands on Lilian—his heart was on fire again with the mere recollection—what had they talked about at luncheons?

He racked his brains to recall it—they had gone so stupid and heavy.

Why, of course, Reeves and a fresh clue, and Fenwick, the man with the knife. Nothing else—nothing to upset her; she had accused him of upsetting her, and so making Lilian suffer.

Why should that talk affect her? Not unless it recalled all that she had gone through, as she always averred.

But still, she wasn't like other women—not soft even to her own child; she had no mother-love, no tenderness for suffering; she could be cruel — and also very strong.

A wild, brutish passion, jealous, exacting — the fondness of the tigress that tears the hand which had caressed it once.

Was that the only way she could love?

He saw again her passionate eyes, heard again her passionate words—"I only live for you!"

He knew not why he had kissed the red lips.

A love like that—no, it wasn't love, but one called it so—would some times go to extremes.

She might have been weary of the long delay; but then—and he almost laughed—there were difficulties.

Supposing a woman could have the nerve, the strength, to drive home a knife, where was she to get it!

And could a woman or a girl as she had seemed to him in those days, gently nurtured, have carried through with such consummate deception, the discovery of the murder, and the inquest?

No third passenger, yet some one—they had all said that—who knew the neighborhood, the people!

Sitting alone, or pacing up and down, he often felt as if he must be going mad, but could no more help himself than a child.

Fickle, he had called himself; look how soon he had waned. Yet she had been faithful But what an unwholesome faith!

One by one his friends had been driven from him; he had been isolated, shut out, till only she remained—she and Lilian, the baby she never loved, never grieved for——almost, she had killed her!

All these things recurred to him in that awful vigil.

Why would she never go near the Croft; why, when at last she went — only to be with him — did she seem as if in mortal dread?

If he had disliked the place, that would have been natural Why, when she hated the whole search, did she suggest seeking Fenwick?

And then he went through the whole of the evidence, striving to find in it something to combat himself, and seeing it all with terrible clearness, as he would have seen it if somebody else, and not Alice had lain under suspicion.

Had Fenwick really lost the knife? Was his story true? Was that long faint of his real? Was the murder committed after junction was passed instead of before it was reached?

Had the position been reversed to acount for the knife being found beyond the junction, and to allow of the third passenger disappearing?

Who was he? No one could trace him—he had come and gone like a shadow.

Was it on purpose that she had said, what she did not say at first, that the man got in in a hurry, because she found that no such man had been noticed on the platform?

What had been done with the notes unless the third passenger had carried them away?

There wasn't a thing found on her—she couldn't easily give herself chloroform as well as the murdered man. So much more likely it was, as she said, that some one else had drugged her!

Then he remembered that day when he had vowed he would take Lilian from her, and the flash of a devil-look in her face.

He remembered his strange sensation of coldness—it crept to his heart again.

But why accuse her and spare himself? If she were guilty, so was he; he had rewarded the foul crime, shared in its profits of happiness—nay, worse, had been

the tempter and inciter.

He had deafened his ears and closed his heart to warnings, prayers, entreaties; he had reached his desire over the body of the man done to death for his sake; he, too, was a murderer!

He made a blind movement to the door, then reeled back. Was he really mad?

She would call it an unforgivable insult if he went to her and demanded the truth.

He tried to force himself to calmness—to form something sentient out of the anguish and horror and humiliation.

He got hold of a vague idea that if some one else were concerned—Marjorie say—he would not be afraid to tell her what was against her.

He reached a chair, and sat there with his hands locked over his head, and all the warm, strong life seeming to ebb away from him.

Upstairs, she was lying asleep, looking like some wonderful creation of marble in her stillness and repose.

The parted lips he had kissed—how those caresses scorched his soul! The beautiful shining hair he had loved to gaze upon; the white hands that had nestled in his—he saw them all, all the beauty that had been his curse and his degradation!

How long he sat there he hardly knew; he was utterly spent, incapable of moving, even to change his attitude. But it was not really the hours it seemed to him.

When at last he stirred it was still dark, not the faintest light in the east betokened the dawn.

He dragged himself up.

He was able to recognize that to pass a second night like this would seem strange to Alice, and might

become known to the servants; but the night in his dressing room would not matter——he often did that when he was up much later than his wife.

He went upstairs, opened the outer door of his room, and passed inside, as noiselessly as a thief.

Fire and light were both there, ready, but the warmth could not send the blood coursing through his veins. It was a sound in the next chamber that did that, a stealthy hand closing the door between the rooms.

He sprang to his feet and flung the door open.

Chapter 325

A MAN UNKNOWN

ALICE, in her pale-blue, lace-covered dressing gown, her long hair hanging about her, stood bending over a table, on which were a glass and a tiny bottle. She started back with a little cry when she saw her husband, her dark eyes gleamed with mingled fear and anger.

"What are you doing?" Ericsen demanded rather roughly; "at that cursed stuff again?"

He laid his hand over hers that had moved to take up the bottle. Her eyes went up to his haggard face.

"What's the matter with you?" she said. "Were you watching me that you creep upstairs, so that I don't hear you?"

"You were asleep."

"No, I wasn't—I can't sleep without that 'cursed stuff', as you call it. Let me have it."

She set her teeth; Ericsen took up the bottle and dashed it on the floor.

"You shall sleep without it," he said. The light had sprung to his eyes, the blood to his cheek.

"Why do you make me so wretched then?" said Alice; but there was not the passion in the tone one might have expected.

"I! You used that months ago, before I could have 'made you wretched.' What did you want it for? Your 'sometimes' is many times."

Alice retreated to the hearth.

"You are always hard on me," she whispered; but the furtive glance, the sense she conveyed of a mingled

fury and fear, undid the pathos of her words. "How could I be happy when you grew so cold? You hate me now—you are brooding over something."

It was all so unlike Alice, the tearful reproach, measured out carefully. She ought to have broken into a storm, as was her way.

Ericsen went to the doors, shut and locked them, then came also to the hearth.

He was so strung up that he lost in some degree the horror that had crushed him when the interview was only in prospective.

The time had come—had, in a way, come of itself, following the law of the inevitable, and driving him on without choice.

"I saw Reeves the other day," he said. "He followed my suggestion — he discovered the person who bought the chloroform."

"It's an odd time to enter on that," said Alice.

She did not attempt a laugh; she pulled up a chair and sat down, shading her face.

"He found that a woman had bought it," went on Ericsen, ignoring her remark.

"Fannie—what is the name?—Lester?"

"No. Long age you urged me to drop this search. I must drop it now, or go on with it—you shall choose."

"That comes a little too late; I am quite indifferent," said Alice, carelessly.

Because there was so much in the balance—life or death—she made a mistake, and omitted the answer he, by a slip, had put into her mouth.

"Drop it, of course, as I always advised," would have non-plussed him; he must have come to an explanation, have stood in a less advantageous position.

"The woman answers your description," he said.

Continued in next number

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